

Virginia Higher Education Governance Reform

The challenges posed by the shifting landscape of higher education suggest a new collaborative governance model may be needed. A new framework built around a collaborative council could provide the flexibility, responsiveness, and accountability to ensure that higher education institutions in the Commonwealth of Virginia remain among the finest colleges and universities in the nation while providing the governance structure necessary to achieve the objective and purposes set forth in the provisions of *Preparing for the Top Jobs of the 21st Century: The Virginia Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2011* (TJ21).

Given the challenges and complexity of higher education and the diverse system of public and private higher education across the Commonwealth of Virginia, a state-level council should be strategic in focus. It should lead the process of developing a strategic plan—a “living” document—that is constantly evolving to best position the Commonwealth to capitalize on opportunities in higher education and, coordinating with other groups and institutions, to address the objective of TJ-21 to “fuel strong economic growth in the Commonwealth and prepare Virginians for the top job opportunities in the knowledge-driven economy of the 21st century.”

As a result of declining state support and associated tuition and fee increases, many students have taken on significant levels of debt; institutions have reduced the number of full time tenure-track faculty and increased the number of adjunct and part-time instructors in the classroom; wage freezes have been implemented; and class sizes have increased. Further, given the limited revenue alternatives available to fund the teaching mission, institutions have increased tuition and fees in an effort to preserve quality and address enrollment demands while adjusting to the decline in state support.

The shifting dynamics in higher education suggest a different approach to the governance structure of public higher education; one that ensures institutions and the Commonwealth adapt together to meet these new challenges and capitalize on opportunities. As public institutions accept greater responsibility for funding their operations, the boards of public colleges and universities need greater operational authority and flexibility while remaining accountable to the citizens of the Commonwealth.

A shared governance model should be structured to focus on strategic planning and higher education policy formulation at the state level. It could also be linked with institutional-level governance and operational control to achieve the necessary autonomy and flexibility needed to adapt to the ever-changing environment of higher education. In addition, accountability could be supported through an internal audit and certification process.

At the state level such a governance framework could be designed around the following:

- State-level higher education governance could be grounded in a collaborative process focused on:
 - 1) Developing a higher education strategic plan for the Commonwealth,

- 2) Formulating state-level policies that guide the funding and operations of public universities and colleges,
 - 3) Reviewing and approving the missions of each public institution,
 - 4) Fostering institutional collaboration to achieve cost savings and enhance quality, and
 - 5) Partnering with institutional-level governance to adequately inform and prepare BOV members on issues, policies, plans, and accountability procedures.
- The composition of such a collaborative body should not only include citizens appointed by the Governor, it could also include representatives of key stakeholders, including presidents of institutions of higher education, the PK-12 school system, economic development and workforce training such as the Virginia Economic Development Partnership and the Secretary of Education;
 - This collaborative council should form a direct alliance and work in concert with groups such as the Virginia Business Higher Education Council, Council on Virginia's Future, the Higher Education Advisory Committee (HEAC) as established through TJ-21, and other groups that are related to higher education in the formulation of a strategic plan and a set of state-level policies for higher education in the Commonwealth.

A key goal of TJ-21 is to enable an additional 100,000 citizens to earn an associate's or bachelor's degree by 2025. To achieve this overall goal, and those set forth in a strategic plan for higher education, the Council could work in concert with the institutions, state officials, and other entities to put in place models, best practices, and performance measures that will be used to guide, validate, and evaluate the institution's performance. These models, best practices and performance measures could inform and align with HEAC's charge to undertake a five year review of state goals and objectives, establish objective criteria for measuring educational-related performance, and evaluate the consequences of meeting or not meeting those goals and objectives.

In order to meet the challenges of ongoing systemic changes in higher education, the need for a new governance model to enhance stakeholder collaboration and balance institutional operational flexibility and responsiveness with accountability is timely. With better information and coordination, the Commonwealth's higher education institutions can continue providing the highest quality education for its citizens while maximizing state resources.